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THE HAMLET PROBLEM  
AND ITS SOLUTION  
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LELAND STANFORD JUNIOR UNIVERSITY

To \_\_\_\_\_

Reverend Alphonso G. Newcomer

Shakespearian Critic.

With the regards of

Emerson Venable.

Cincinnati, O.

August 5, 1912.



**THE HAMLET PROBLEM  
AND ITS  
SOLUTION**

**BY  
EMERSON VENABLE**

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THE theory advanced in these pages was first suggested by the author at the close of a series of lectures on *Hamlet* delivered in the spring of 1907, and was afterwards presented in a paper read before the Literary Club of Cincinnati, October 17, 1908.





**“ Report me and my cause aright  
To the unsatisfied.”**

*Hamlet, Act V, Scene II.*



**THE HAMLET PROBLEM AND  
ITS SOLUTION**



## THE HAMLET PROBLEM AND ITS SOLUTION

### I

Two hundred years of critical discussion have not sufficed to reconcile conflicting impressions regarding the scope of Shakespeare's design in *The Tragedy of Hamlet*. No theory which has yet been advanced to explain the unifying motive of the drama has found universal acceptance among scholars, who, however they may seem to agree in their interpretation of particular passages, entertain widely divergent opinions concerning the character and conduct of the Prince of Denmark. Why does the brave and high-spirited Hamlet, whose prophetic soul anticipates the Ghost's horrible disclosure with the impetuous assurance:

## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

---

"Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift  
As meditation or the thoughts of love,  
May sweep to my revenge!"

—why does this noble and imperious youth not only fail to *sweep* to his revenge, but delay the performance of the act for days and weeks and months,—though all the while, as he himself bitterly confesses (Act IV, Scene IV), he has "cause and will and strength and means to do it," and though he feels himself exhorted to the deed by "examples gross as earth"?

That the critic, when confronted by the problem of Hamlet's delay, is not justified in brushing it aside as an immaterial issue, or in disposing of it in vague and general terms as being at best a consideration of minor importance, may readily be inferred from the emphasis directly laid upon the question in Hamlet's soliloquies and in his confidential discourse with Horatio. No other interest has Shakespeare

## AND ITS SOLUTION

---

kept so constantly before his audience. It would seem, indeed, as though the great dramatic master might have cherished secret doubts as to whether his one judicious critic, whose opinion "o'erweighs a whole theatre of others," would apprehend the true motive of the tragedy unless the subjective conflict of the Prince were thrust into relief by the employment of every method of dramatic emphasis within the sphere of his resourceful art. All of Hamlet's longer soliloquies, excepting the very first (Act I, Scene II), which occurs before he has been informed of the appearance of the Ghost, and the soliloquy beginning, "To be or not to be," bear directly upon the paramount question,—the wherefore of his delay in wreaking vengeance upon his uncle. All other questions of the play, however significant, may be their relation to the theme, receive subordinate emphasis, and seem to depend for their settlement upon the solu-



## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

---

tion of the central dramatic problem, the peculiar difficulties of which have led to the wildest vagaries in the field of *Hamlet* interpretation.

What solutions of that problem, it may be asked, have been suggested by leading writers on the subject? An adequate exposition of the many ingenious and plausible theories which have originated in England, Germany, and America, would fill volumes. Only the briefest possible discussion, therefore, of five typical hypotheses that have found the widest acceptance among Shakespearian critics, will here be attempted.<sup>1</sup>

Some idea may at the outset be gained regarding the different standpoints from which the question has been viewed, when it is noted that of the five representative

<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive survey of the literature of *Hamlet* criticism the reader is referred to Professor A. C. Bradley's epoch-marking volume, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 1905.

## AND ITS SOLUTION

---

it involves is completely merged in the diviner purpose. Thus Hamlet infinitely more than performs the sacred duty which Goethe would have us believe to be "too hard" for him, and what the German poet characterizes as not the impossible in itself but the impossible to Hamlet, becomes, in the light of Hamlet's procedure, a relatively trivial issue.—To which conclusive refutation of the "sentimental" theory may be added the trenchant argument of Professor Bradley, who, in his illuminating volume, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, disposes of Goethe's hypothesis in the following words:

"This conception, though not without its basis in certain beautiful traits of Hamlet's nature, is utterly untrue. It is too kind to Hamlet on the one side, and it is quite unjust to him on another. . . . For the 'sentimental' Hamlet you can feel only pity not unmingled with contempt. . . . But consider the text. This shrink-

## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

---

ing flower-like youth — how could he possibly have done what we see Hamlet do? What likeness to him is there in the Hamlet who, summoned by the Ghost, bursts from his terrified friends with the cry:

Unhand me, gentlemen!

By heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that lets me;


the Hamlet who scarcely once speaks to the King without an insult, or to Polonius without a gibe; the Hamlet who storms at Ophelia and speaks daggers to his mother; the Hamlet who, hearing a cry behind the arras, whips out his sword in an instant and runs the eavesdropper through; the Hamlet who sends his 'school-fellows' to their death and never troubles his head about them more; the Hamlet who is the first man to board a pirate ship, and who fights with Laertes in the grave; the Hamlet of the catastrophe, an omnipotent fate, before whom all the court stands helpless, who, as the truth

## AND ITS SOLUTION

---

breaks upon him, rushes on the King, drives his foil right through his body, then seizes the poisoned cup and forces it violently between the wretched man's lips, and in the throes of death has force and fire enough to wrest the cup from Horatio's hand ('By heaven, I'll have it!') lest he should drink and die? This man, the Hamlet of the play, is a heroic, terrible figure. He would have been formidable to Othello or Macbeth. If the sentimental Hamlet had crossed him, he would have hurled him from his path with one sweep of his arm."

The second of the typical hypotheses which we have selected for brief review is known as the "conscience" theory. According to this assumption, "Hamlet was restrained by conscience or a moral scruple; he was unable to convince himself that it was right to avenge his father."—The "conscience" theory, though less objectionable than the "sentimental" theory,





## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

being not so manifestly at variance with our impression of Hamlet as a masterful and heroic nature, finds no substantial support in the first four acts of the play, and fails to account satisfactorily for the unrelenting sarcasm with which the Prince reproaches himself for his delay. In obedience to the imperative monitions of honor, Hamlet assumes that he ought immediately to avenge his father's murder; nor do the soliloquies afford the least evidence that he is consciously deterred from vengeance by a moral scruple.

It may be added that the "conscience" theory rests mainly on the narrow basis of a single speech of Hamlet to Horatio in Act V, Scene II:—"Does it not, thinks't thee, stand me now upon," etc.—This passage undoubtedly involves a question of conscience; but the speech occurs in the closing scene of the play, and to give the lines a retroactive signification not in accord with the earlier progressive impres-

## AND ITS SOLUTION

---

sions vividly stamped on the mind by the several soliloquies, were to fail to apprehend the simplest and most fundamental principle of all dramatic and all literary art.

We come now to the third and, perhaps, most widely accepted of the subjective explanations of Hamlet's delay. This hypothesis, which assumes that the cause of his inaction is irresolution springing from an "excess of the reflective or speculative habit of mind," originated in England and Germany simultaneously, in the first decade of the nineteenth century, and has been appropriately named, after its authors, the Schlegel-Coleridge theory. Schlegel says of the play: "The whole is intended to show that a calculating consideration which exhausts all the relations and possible consequences of a deed, must cripple the power of acting; as Hamlet himself expresses it:

## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

---

'And thus the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought;  
And enterprises of great pith and moment,  
With this regard, their currents turn awry,  
And lose the name of action.'

. . . He is a hypocrite towards himself;  
his far-fetched scruples are often mere pre-  
texts to cover his want of determination:  
thoughts, as he says, on a different occa-  
sion, which have

'but one part wisdom  
And ever three parts coward.'

He has no firm belief in himself or in  
anything else. . . . He loses himself in  
labyrinths of thought."

Coleridge discovers in Hamlet "an al-  
most enormous intellectual activity and a  
proportionate aversion to real action con-  
sequent upon it."

What is the basic fault of the Schlegel-  
Coleridge theory? Wherein does this hy-  
pothesis fail to satisfy the vital require-  
ments of the play? The answer to these

## AND ITS SOLUTION

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questions is not far to seek. The theory implies an inadequate conception of the scope of the drama similar to that which renders Goethe's assumption untenable; and if the later view seems to answer more nearly to our "imaginative impression" of the character and conduct of Hamlet, it is only because the error which it involves, though similar in kind, is less in degree. The objection which has been urged against the "sentimental" theory may, indeed, be urged with equal force against any other theory which attributes Hamlet's delay to a special fault or morbid bias of nature. The "almost enormous intellectual activity" of Hamlet, as diagnosed and symptomized by Coleridge and Schlegel, is a morbid limitation not less incompatible with the conception of Hamlet as protagonist of a drama of triumphant moral achievement, than is the unheroic want of nerve characteristic of Goethe's Hamlet.



## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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Perhaps the most conspicuous cause of the wide diversity of opinion as to the nature of Hamlet's internal struggle is the tendency (almost universal among critics) to disregard the fact that the *person*, Hamlet, exists only as an organic element of the play, and that therefore any attempt to analyze the character as a thing apart from its dramatic relations must necessarily prove futile.

(41) The most astounding result of such an attempt is exhibited in the fourth of our typical theories, which assumes that Hamlet is *mad*, or that he is the victim of acute melancholia, being subject to sudden outbreaks of insane and violent passion. In view of what has been said in the foregoing paragraphs, it will readily be perceived that the "madness" theory is wholly indefensible. The arguments which confute the theory of Goethe and that of Schlegel and Coleridge, reduce to mere absurdity any hypothesis which at-

## AND ITS SOLUTION

---

tributes Hamlet's delay to conditions purely pathological.

As a stimulating offset and corrective to all such views, it will not be unprofitable, at this point, before proceeding to the consideration of the fifth and last of our typical theories, to quote a few pertinent sentences from an eminently sane appreciation by the late George Henry Miles, the American poet-critic, whose brilliant "Review of Hamlet," first published in 1870, is said to have influenced Edwin Booth in his interpretation of the tragedy:

"There is never a storm in *Hamlet* over which the 'noble and most sovereign reason' of the young prince is not as visibly dominant as the rainbow, the crowning grace and glory of the scene. . . . The most salient phase of Hamlet's character is his superb intellectual superiority to all comers. . . . The fundamental charm of *Hamlet* is its amazing elo-

## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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1 } quence; its thoughts are vaster than deeds, its eloquence mightier than action. The tragedy, in its most imposing aspect, is a series of intellectual encounters. . . . But the difficulty of *representing* this! The enormous difficulty of achieving a true tragic success, less by the passions and trials than by the pure intellectual splendor of the hero! . . . For the fundamental idea of the tragedy is not only essentially non-dramatic, but peculiarly liable to misrepresentation; since any marked predominance of the intellectual over the animal nature is constantly mistaken for weakness. . . . The difference between a strong man and a weak one, though indefinable, is infinite. . . . A close review of the play will show that Hamlet is strong, not weak,—that the basis of his character is *strength*, illimitable strength. There is not an act or an utterance of his, from first to last, which is not a manifestation of power. Slow, cautious, capricious, he

## AND ITS SOLUTION

---

may sometimes be, or seem to be; but always strong, always large-souled, always resistless."

It might have been expected that in his interpretation of the tragedy the eloquent writer whose words we have just quoted should have thrown added light on the disputed question of Hamlet's delay; but this is not the case. Like other critics, great and small, when he undertakes to explain the significance of the soliloquies, he leaves the reader in uncertainty as to the precise nature of Hamlet's internal struggle.

The fifth and last of the typical theories demanding special consideration, approaches the problem from a viewpoint directly antithetical to that assumed in all the theories thus far discussed, and, instead of attributing Hamlet's delay to subjective causes, ascribes it wholly to causes external. This revolutionary hypothesis, which has received the endorsement of



## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

---

several Shakespearian scholars of distinction, dates back to about the middle of the nineteenth century, and is fitly named, after its German authors, the Klein-Werder theory.

Referring to the assumption of all the leading critics, with Goethe at their head, that Hamlet's hesitation is due to some internal cause, Werder writes:

"For my own part I must flatly dissent from this conclusion. Let me ask, first of all, would Hamlet have dared to act as these critics almost unanimously demand that he should have done? Can Hamlet; or can he not, so act? It is certainly a pertinent question. I maintain that he could not have thus acted, and for purely objective reasons. The facts of the case, the force of all the circumstances, the very nature of his task, directly forbid it. . . . What is Hamlet to do? What is his actual task? A sharply defined duty, but a very different one from that which the critics

## AND ITS SOLUTION

---

have imposed upon him. It is not to crush the King at once — he could commit no greater blunder — but to bring him to confession, to unmask and convict him. That is Hamlet's task, his first, nearest, inevitable duty."

The Klein-Werder theory, though in some important respects it is in closer harmony with the larger movement of the play than any earlier view, is wholly at variance with the text where it touches the vital question of Hamlet's internal struggle. To one disregarding the obvious import of the soliloquies, Werder's hypothesis might seem plausible; but it answers the baffling question by answering it *away!* Werder's solution of the problem resembles the solution of a perplexing puzzle: the puzzle being deciphered, the mystery is gone. This writer's most serious error, as will later be made evident, lies in his failure to distinguish between what may be termed Hamlet's *absolute* duty

## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

---

and the special duty imposed by the Ghost. But not to enter, at this point, into a discussion which will engage us at considerable length in subsequent pages, we will cite two objections among many formulated by Bradley,—either of which, we believe, is sufficiently potent to demolish the whole glittering structure of the Klein-Werder theory: (1) "From beginning to end of the play, Hamlet never makes the slightest reference to any external difficulty." (2) "Not only does Hamlet fail to allude to such difficulties, but he always assumes that he *can* obey the Ghost, and he once asserts this in so many words ('Sith I have cause and will and strength and means To do't,' IV. iv. 45)."—To which unanswerable objections it is superfluous to add the equally effective argument of Professor Tolman, that, "In spite of an amount of soliloquy which is unexampled in dramatic literature, this theory

## AND ITS SOLUTION

---

is obliged to assume that Hamlet fails to express the one purpose which fills his mind."



## II

IN the province of interpretative criticism, imaginative insight and intuition are at best but aids of a settled science which must proceed in accordance with the unvarying principles of an impersonal logic. The terms *art* and *criticism* are, in a sense, antithetical. Art is "creation"; criticism is "discovery." Literature in its transcendent forms is an *organic birth*, issuing from the throes of exalted imagination. It is complete and absolute — not less complex and perfect in its internal relations than the mind which bodies it forth. Thus, like life itself, it must forever baffle and inspire, inviting the curious reason to probe its deeper meanings and to determine the unifying laws of its structure. Criticism, whether analytic or synthetic,

## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

---

though in its higher operations it must needs derive its potency from rapturous sources akin to creative genius, is, like all other science, objective in method, its mode being none other than the familiar one of induction and deduction.

In approaching the special subject before us we may therefore assume that, whatever may be the true explanation of Hamlet's delay, no solution of the problem derived from a consecutive study of the soliloquies in the light of Shakespeare's dramatic method, can be accepted as the correct solution, unless it be in harmony with conclusions reached by *deductive inference in a comprehensive survey of the general design of the play, as revealed in its leading issues.* Thus, from the standpoint of interpretative criticism, the question, "What is the *special* nature of Hamlet's *internal struggle?*" is involved in a larger question:—"In view of Hamlet's relation to the total dramatic action, what

## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

---

*must be the general import of that struggle?"*

To begin, then, with the most comprehensive impressions left upon the mind by the total action of the drama, it may be affirmed that there are two main conclusions in which modern Shakespearian authorities agree:—the first, that in the tragedy of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare presents the human situation in its broadest relations, imaging man as circumscribed in all his actions by Divine Providence;—the second, that the character of Hamlet, the central person of the drama, is without doubt the most nearly universal of Shakespeare's master creations; that, in the many-sidedness of his mind, he seems, as it were, to typify the human race, representing an epitome of man's nature.

Of these two mutually involving conceptions, the former and more comprehensive,—that relating to the general design of the play,—has been dwelt upon by all

## AND ITS SOLUTION

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the leading critics from Goethe to Bradley; while the latter conception,—that relating to the character of the Prince,—has received and is receiving special emphasis from Shakespearian scholars of our own day, who, however they may differ as to the cause of Hamlet's inaction, are in perfect agreement as to the universality of his most sovereign intellect and spirit.

Whatever the point of view from which the drama is regarded by recent writers, this idea of the representative nature of the Prince is somewhere emphasized and elucidated in their discussions. The general tendency of present-day criticism touching the question of Hamlet's character may readily be discerned by a cursory perusal of the abundant periodical literature on the subject, recorded in "Poole's Index" for the past decade. This tendency is well shown in the following extract from an article by J. Chur-



## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

---

ton Collins, in *The Contemporary Review* (November, 1905):

“As every man, according to Coleridge, is born either a Platonist or an Aristotelian, so there is no human being in whom some of the characteristics of Hamlet do not exist. . . . Hamlet is not so much an individual as humanity individualized, not so much man in integrity as man in solution. Probably no poet, no artist, no philosopher, has ever existed, who would not recognize a kinsman in him, and who would not read more than one chapter of his own most secret history in this all-typical delineation. . . . He exhibits, sometimes by turns and sometimes simultaneously, but always in excess, all that is implied in the emotional and æsthetic, and all that is implied in the reflective and philosophic temper. . . . Fatalist and sceptic, stoic and epicurean, alike claim him and have reason to claim him. \* There is not a phase in the dread never-ending conflict

## AND ITS SOLUTION

---

between destiny and human will and between the law in man's members and the law that is without, which has not its symbol in his story and in his conduct. . . . So fluid and mobile is his nature, so responsive and plastic his sympathies, that he is not simply moulded, but transformed, by what for the moment appeals to him. And with such intensity does he enter into the life of the instant, and identify himself with it, that what in other men are merely moods, become in him little less than phases of existence. He thus appears to be not one man but many, passing with the plasticity of his creator's genius into sphere after sphere of intellectual and emotional activity, the poet lavishing on him in each of these transformations the choicest treasures of his wit, his wisdom, and his eloquence."

To this elaborate analysis of Hamlet's mind and personality, may be added the final conclusions of a recent American

## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

---

writer, Walter Libby, who, in an article entitled "The Evolution of Hamlet Criticism," published in *Poet-Lore* (1904), recognizing the Shakespearian universality of Hamlet's character, finds refuge for baffled criticism in the generalizations of "a view anticipated by Coleridge, . . . that Hamlet is the typical man of genius." "The question of Hamlet's character," he observes, "has acquired its great importance because one has divined here not merely the development of an individual, but the evolution of the race."

That the conception of Hamlet so strongly emphasized by recent writers conforms in essential respects to the impression invariably left upon the imagination by an uninterrupted perusal of the play, is evidenced by numerous ingenious theories of an earlier date, which have sought to convert the Prince of Denmark into the embodiment of such comprehensive abstractions as Paganism, Protestantism,

## AND ITS SOLUTION

---

Germany, the World, in each of which theories the later view is either implied or foreshadowed.

But the breadth of Shakespeare's design in the creation of the character of Hamlet is subtly intimated in the text. It is no accident, assuredly, but a consideration of vital artistic significance, that the author has introduced into this drama (Act II, Scene II), and has put into Hamlet's own mouth, the impressive words of that consummate prose description of ideal man, which, as a characterization of the human type, is unparalleled in literature:

"What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving, how express and admirable! in action, how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!"

Who, with judgment unwarped by madness theories, on reading these words in the responsive mood of natural criticism,



## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

---

can fail to associate them with the impression left on the mind by the character and conduct of Hamlet himself?

But Shakespeare is even more explicit. Lest the suggestive import of the passage should be lost on his audience or reader, in the very next scene (Act III, Scene I) he has placed upon the usually uneloquent lips of Ophelia the following lines descriptive of the Prince:

“Oh, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!  
The courtier's, scholar's, soldier's, eye, tongue,  
sword;  
The expectancy and rose of the fair state,  
The glass of fashion, and the mould of form,  
The observ'd of all observers, quite, quite down!”

— which lines are followed a moment later by another reference to Hamlet's “noble and most sovereign reason,” and, again, to his “unmatched form and feature.”— Could anything in dramatic art be more clearly indicative of the author's ideal mo-

## AND ITS SOLUTION

---

tive in the creation of the central character of this tragedy?

Not less significant is the introduction into the next scene (Act III, Scene II), of that other passage of memorable prose, in which Shakespeare, through the medium of Hamlet, defines, once for all, in comprehensive phrase, the supreme function of dramatic art: — “To hold, as ’twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.” — In this, the first of his great philosophic tragedies, Shakespeare exhibits life in its ultimate and eternal relations; — he holds the mirror up to *universal* nature, representing man as conditioned and circumscribed in all his actions by an omniscient Providence, now promoting and now thwarting human will, but ever intimating the absolute Good.

The relative breadth of the poet's de-

## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

---

sign may be inferred from the fact that the tragedy of *Hamlet* is unique among Shakespearian dramas in that it involves accident as a fundamental consideration of the theme. This is clearly shown (in accordance with Shakespeare's characteristic method of balance and contrast) by the antithetical nature and conspicuous setting of the two most obvious examples of accident, from which such mighty consequences flow, and which, indeed, constitute the very turning-points of the dramatic action. We refer, of course, on the one hand, to Hamlet's disastrous sword-thrust through the arras, involving the unintended slaughter of Polonius; and, on the other hand, to his miraculous and *fortunate* venture of meeting and boarding the pirate ship, whereby he is providentially brought back to Denmark, to consummate his appointed task. And Shakespeare does not leave us in any doubt regarding the special significance of these

## AND ITS SOLUTION

---

accidents, as witness Hamlet's own after-generalizations in reference to each fateful event. Toward the end of the scene which opens with the accidental killing of Polonius, and in which the Prince of Denmark, striving for his mother's salvation, wrings her heart with bitter reproach, Hamlet, in a prophetic moment of spiritual exaltation, utters the following words:

"Once more, good night;

And when you are desirous to be blest,  
I'll blessing beg of you.—For this same lord,

*[Pointing to Polonius.]*

I do repent; but heaven hath pleas'd it so,  
To punish me with this and this with me,  
That I must be their scourge and minister."

Hamlet discerns in the defeat of his intended purpose a special revelation of providential design, according to which his soul, through the chastisement of remorse, is purged and prepared for its appointed mission.

In like manner and with equal clearness



## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

---

has Shakespeare indicated, by means of impressive generalizations put into the mouth of Hamlet, the artistic motive in the case of the second obvious instance of accident. Referring to his miraculous escape from the snares of royal knavery, the Prince, upon his return to Denmark, in his disclosures to Horatio, preludes the account of his daring venture, with the reflection:

"Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well  
When our deep plots do fail; and that should  
teach us  
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will."

To which words, Horatio, with an absolute finality of phrase so exceptional with that reticent character as to arrest attention, responds: "That is most certain."

*"There's a divinity that shapes our ends!"*

Perhaps no other line ever penned by Shakespeare has found a more universal

## AND ITS SOLUTION

---

response in the souls of men. The sublime words have become hackneyed by familiar repetition. But the special connection in which they were first uttered, by the Prince of Denmark, is rarely considered. Their philosophic import in the tragedy of *Hamlet*, as throwing light upon the vital implications of accident, is but vaguely apprehended by the average reader. Certain it is, however, that no other single generalization of the play carries with it a more far-reaching suggestiveness than this utterance of Hamlet; no one line indicates more clearly the scope of the author's dramatic design.

Numerous other occurrences in the play serve to illustrate the operation of Divine Will through accident. Not to attempt to exhaust the theme, only two minor instances will here be cited to show that the conception of Providence revealing itself in modes of chance or opportunity, is vital to the whole design. The first of these



## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

---

subordinate examples is the fortuitous coming of the "players" to Elsinore; the second, is the unexpected summoning of Hamlet to his mother's chamber, after the ominous "play-scene." Witness what mighty spiritual purposes these otherwise trivial occurrences are made to serve through the sovereign reason of the Prince. In the former instance Hamlet becomes the Heaven-appointed scourge of one human soul; in the latter, Heaven's "scourge and minister" unto another.

Enough has been said to show that the conception of Omniscient Providence controlling the destinies of men is *paramount* in the tragedy of *Hamlet*, and involves, therefore, directly or indirectly, all issues of the drama. In the other tragedies,—*Macbeth*, for example, to which *Hamlet* bears a close kinship,—the operations of Providence are less obviously indicated: they constitute, at best, but the shadowy and awful background of the cen-

## AND ITS SOLUTION

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tral human scene; the supernatural action is purposely obscured, and serves to throw the human action into relief. But it is otherwise with the tragedy of *Hamlet*, in which the operations of Providence are so expressly indicated — brought to the foreground and thrust on the view in such concrete detail — that the larger philosophic conception of Divine Will shaping the affairs of men might well be regarded as the principal theme, the all-absorbing motive of the play, were it not for the engrossing fascination of the central tragic figure, in whom the convergent lines of dramatic interest meet.

In the transcendent mystery of providential design involving both the objective and the subjective world, lies the only true enigma of Hamlet's delay. Not only is the Prince thwarted from *without* by the inscrutable workings of Providence: he is equally thwarted from *within*. Hamlet's mystery is, thus, *our* mystery; his uni-

## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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verse, the faithful reflex of our own. To attempt, therefore, in an absolute sense, to go back of Hamlet's mystery, or the mystery of Hamlet's world, and "pluck it out," so to speak, were to attempt not merely to go back of Shakespeare's art, but to go back of Shakespeare. Enough that the poet has left the secret of God's infinite design — a mystery.

Only by clearly distinguishing between the subject and the subject-matter of the play, between the enigmatic mystery inherent in the theme and the legitimate problem which presents itself in the dramatic unfolding of the theme, shall we be able to differentiate with certainty the known from the unknown quantities which the problem involves.

From the generalization which we have reached regarding the universality of Hamlet's nature, what inference must be drawn? In view of the breadth of the author's design in this tragedy and the or-

## AND ITS SOLUTION

ganic relation of the central person to that design, one conclusion is unavoidable: that since Hamlet, in the many-sidedness of his character, may be said to typify mankind, representing, as it were, the universal human, his internal struggle must be typical and representative. Whatever may be the peculiar dramatic implications of that struggle, however rigidly Shakespeare may have found his art restricted by the crude materials of his plot, it is certain that the vital conflict revealed in Hamlet's soliloquies is but the image of a conflict silently waging in every human soul.

But Hamlet, as protagonist of this drama, is no merely passive instrument of fate: he is an active moral agent. Morality, in the broadest and deepest sense, is the basic element of his character. Every duty is holy to him — duty to father, to mother, to man, to God. Hamlet's religious earnestness of nature combines with filial piety, intense social affections, and

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## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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austere virtue, to form a character fitly representing ideal manhood,— a character not less unwavering in its adherence to the principles of loyalty and self-sacrifice, than its antithesis, the character of Macbeth, is absolute in its abandonment to the opposite principles of selfishness and Heaven-defying ambition.

A suggestive comparison may be drawn between the tragedies, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, which present a most striking contrast: not, indeed, in motive,— for they bear a remarkably close ethical kinship, being, as it were, dramatic sermons on the same grand and universal theme,— but in the point of view from which the theme is contemplated, *Hamlet* being the positive and *Macbeth* the negative presentation of the same vast thesis. It is not so much in native mental powers as in moral attitude that the central tragic persons, Macbeth and Hamlet, differ. The two characters are similarly endowed with certain gen-



## AND ITS SOLUTION

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eral capacities of intellect and imagination, the philosophic reason and the poetic apprehension, which enable them to discern at all times "the moral properties and scope of things," and to prevision the even-handed justice which the Divine Judge shall mete out to human souls in this world or in the world to come. But in Hamlet's nature these powers are rooted in the deep soil of a profoundly religious temperament;—not so with Macbeth, whose intellectual nature countervails the spiritual. Macbeth finds his perfect foil in Macduff; Hamlet, in Claudius. In the subtle artistic contrast between the Prince of Denmark and his villainous uncle, the critic may discover the key to Hamlet's true character. In the light of that contrast, how monstrous, how shallow, how absurd, any description of Hamlet's temperament which would attribute to morbid or weakling causes that cloud-hung and ominous melancholy so opposite to the dis-

## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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sembling King's all-sanguine mood. In the gathered clouds of that melancholy lurks the lightning of a terrible retribution,—the bolts which shall blast and purify the "rotten" state of Denmark. The overwhelming mood which gives pause to every resolution and retards every action, is the index and proof of Hamlet's universality of soul in the presence of infinite and eternal forces which can neither be understood nor controlled by man. Hamlet is struggling at every moment, with almost superhuman faculties, to comprehend the mystery upon which every slightest deed must depend for its moral efficacy.

And what inference must be drawn from the emphasis laid throughout the play upon the profound morality of Hamlet,—emphasis so obvious as to make the hero appear at times in a haloed light, as the embodiment of all the spiritual forces of man,—at other times almost as a religious agent? One conclusion certainly

## AND ITS SOLUTION

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can not be amiss: Hamlet's struggle, whatever its special nature, is, in the broadest sense, a *moral* struggle.

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### III

WHY have critics failed to discover the true nature of Hamlet's subjective experience? No such baffling problem presents itself in the other great tragedies,—*Macbeth*, *Lear*, and *Othello*,—concerning the underlying motives of which Shakespearian scholars are in substantial agreement. The design of each of these tragedies,—nay, of every other play of Shakespeare,—is relatively obvious: which fact should go to show that in the case of the exceptional drama the fault is not with Shakespeare, as some have presumed to suggest, but with the critics, who, when approaching the study of *Hamlet*, have seemed to waver in their faith in the uniform consistency of Shakespeare's dramatic method. Shakespeare's method

## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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never varies in its essential features. The principles of dramatic art which clearly reveal his underlying purpose in *Macbeth*, *Lear*, and *Othello*, are precisely the same as those by which the theme of *Hamlet* is suggested.—And what are the uniform principles of art in accordance with which Shakespeare's tragedies are constructed? In each of the greater tragedies, where the interest is profoundly psychological, supreme importance attaches to the *soliloquies*; for it is only by the light they shed upon the action of the drama that its deeper motive may be truly discerned. But Shakespeare's art, strictly adhering to the avowed purpose of holding the mirror up to nature, *like* nature, exhibits its organic laws indirectly, and only to the comprehensive vision of scientific method. The direct statement of his theme, in so many words, if this, indeed, were within the possibility of language, is precluded by the very nature of his task. But the



## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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design is perfect, and the soliloquies, and the generalizations which they embody, reveal the symmetry of that design by clearly distinguishing the several stages of the psychic movement. Of special significance in the light they shed upon the theme are these generalizations when they mark the close of scenes and acts, where their cumulative effect is most pronounced, and where they may be said to serve as obvious sign-boards indicating the trend of the dramatic action. And what is true of the generalizations of soliloquy applies with equal force to all important speeches which disclose the inmost reflections of the central character.

Such, in brief, is Shakespeare's method. Such are the uniform rules of his art as it relates to the conspicuous setting-forth of his theme. The selfsame principles which underlie the construction of Shakespeare's other great tragedies find consummate illustration in the play of *Hamlet*, in

## AND ITS SOLUTION

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which drama the soliloquies are arranged in just gradation, exhibiting clearly, and stage by stage, the progress of the moral struggle, the turning-point being at the middle of the play, while the divisions of scene and act are almost invariably marked by significant generalizations.

The failure of critics to differentiate the several stages of Hamlet's moral development has arisen not from any deviation in dramatic method on Shakespeare's part, but from a difficulty inherent in the theme. In each of the other great tragedies is represented the deterioration or utter ruin of a soul. The tragedy of *Hamlet* exhibits the mind of man in its *upward* struggle. This moral transformation is not an evolution from an ignoble to a noble state, from bad to good, but rather a development from immature to mature manhood, a mental and spiritual ripening. It is owing to the occult and subtle nature of Hamlet's transformation

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## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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that the successive stages of his moral progress have not been clearly discerned.

With the view of determining the central motive of the tragedy, let us now examine, in the light of Shakespeare's dramatic method, the latter half of the fateful scene (Act I, Scene V) in which Hamlet, on hearing from his father's ghost the harrowing disclosure of his uncle's crime, instantly commits himself to vengeance, and in which the initial stages of his moral struggle are presented. The Ghost withdraws, waving sorrowful farewell:

"Adieu, adieu! Hamlet, remember me."

The Ghost vanishes. Hamlet, his heart wrung with anguish, his mind distraught by powerful conflicting emotions, cries:

"Remember thee!

Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat  
In this distracted globe. Remember thee!  
Yea, from the table of my memory

## AND ITS SOLUTION

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I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,  
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,  
That youth and observation copied there,  
And thy commandment all alone shall live  
Within the book and volume of my brain,  
Unmixed with baser matter; yes, by heaven!"

The action advances. Horatio and Marcellus rush in. Hamlet indulges in "wild and whirling words,"—that is, in whirling words of irony uttered with intent to obscure his dread secret, in stress of tragic emotion unintelligible to his questioners. He swears his friends to secrecy, and the act ends. But with what significant words? Not, as might have been expected by the reader,—not with a vehement renewal, on Hamlet's part, of the passionate resolve already formed. Quite the contrary. The duty has expanded to unanticipated proportions. Pervaded by a tragic sense of moral responsibility, Hamlet exclaims:

"The time is out of joint;—O cursed spite,  
That ever I was born to set it right!"



## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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In this moment of prophetic illumination it is evident that the mandate received from the Ghost has translated itself into a vast, an impersonal, a religious duty! Not merely is Hamlet to kill the King: he has assumed the prodigious task of setting aright the disjointed time.

But his father's commandment returns to mind with renewed intensity. The larger purpose is too vague and shadowy to avail against feelings of self-reproach arising as Hamlet contemplates the sacred personal duty which he has not yet discharged, and which outraged nature summons him to perform. He reels into self-disgust. He accuses himself of cowardice and beastly oblivion.—But the more he knows and the more he thinks, the less positive becomes the assurance that he is not right in delaying the deed. Not impotence of will, nor morbid irresolution, but the inherent moral forces of his nature, delay his course until at last, by direct in-



## AND ITS SOLUTION

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tervention of the "divinity that shapes our ends," he consummates the task for which all his life, all his sorrow, all his aspiration, have prepared him.

Thus by implication we have anticipated the final step in our solution of the special problem presented in the soliloquies. It has been shown that Hamlet's internal struggle is, in the broadest sense, a *moral* struggle, and that, as such, it symbolizes a universal experience of the race. We are now prepared for the final inference: That Hamlet's subjective conflict represents the profoundest and subtlest of all struggles:—the conflict forever waging in the human soul between the personal and the impersonal motives of life,—a conflict not between clearly defined wrong and clearly defined right, but rather between *two rights*, the one relative and the other absolute.

Our theory, therefore, finds its symbol in a figure the very reverse of that pro-

## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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posed by Goethe. Instead of a beautiful, most moral, but unheroic nature, sinking beneath the weight of a duty too great for it to bear, we see in Hamlet a mighty soul which, far from sinking, rises in stature and in strength beneath an ever-increasing burden. Shakespeare, instead of showing the effect of "a great deed laid upon a soul unequal to the performance of it," has shown a limited deed of questionable expediency when considered in its absolute and eternal bearings, laid upon a soul too great for its performance as an unrelated obligation of mere personal revenge.

This solution of the problem which, baffling Hamlet, has baffled all the critics, is the only solution which is in harmony with every scene and every syllable of the play, and this solution alone affords an adequate and truly psychological explanation of the tragedy.

In the comprehensive monologue, "To

## AND ITS SOLUTION

be or not to be," which appears in the third act, the artistic center of the play, may be discerned the profounder implications of Hamlet's moral struggle as typifying a universal human experience. Here *only*, in the drama, does Shakespeare present the thwarting problem in its wider ethical bearings. It will be observed that in this soliloquy the lesser question of *vengeance* is for the time forgotten, or, more truly speaking, merged and lost in the greater question of the *imminence of divine law*.— And what are the larger connotations of the tragedy, discoverable in Hamlet's speculative thoughts in this monologue? Here, at the calm tidal center of the drama, drop the plummet of exploring criticism to its profoundest depths. "To be or not to be, that is the question." That is, indeed, *the ultimate question of man*, involving all other questions which arise from the conflict between the finite and the eternal issues of

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## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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life. And what is Hamlet's answer to the all-comprehensive inquiry? Death, to the weary and suffering spirit,—death as the dreamless end of all,—“were a consummation devoutly to be wished.” But man, through the dread of something after death, shrinks from suicide. Yet death shall come to all!—Man yearns for release from the ills of life, but he dare not predetermine the date of that release; he dare not forestall the edict of an inscrutable destiny to consummate his devout desire. He must endure the burden of earthly existence until, at the appointed hour, Heaven fulfils his wish without his own contriving.—What, now, are the implications of this mighty human paradox as it touches the subordinate question of Hamlet's delay in executing vengeance upon his uncle? “*To be or not to be*”: This, assuredly, is no question of the killing of a murderous king! But the same “dread of something after death,” which “puz-

## AND ITS SOLUTION

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zles the will, and makes us rather bear the ills we have than fly to others that we know not of,"—this same inexplicable fear, which refrains the hand from suicide, operates obscurely as a deterring influence in all his reasonings concerning the act of mortal retribution to which Hamlet is impelled by every honorable instinct of blood. The divine authority which forewarns against "self-slaughter," admonishes no less against revenge. "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord." "Thou shalt not kill." Eternal issues are at stake for both the slayer and the slain. Thus we see that the ultimate moral implication of the question, "Why not end one's own life by suicide?" is identical with that of the question, "Why not kill the King?" and that the self-accusation of cowardice involved in the gloomy generalization, "Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all," is, in the final analysis, identical in nature with the



## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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bitter reproach with which Hamlet arraigns himself for having so long deferred the execution of his father's dread command.

We ourselves, on reading the tragedy or witnessing its performance, are baffled and perplexed by the obstinate questionings that perplex and baffle Hamlet, giving pause to passionate action. And why? Because, in imagination, we find ourselves, like Hamlet, confronted by an inscrutable situation. Because, like Hamlet, we respond with instant and impetuous determination to the Ghost's imploring appeal, and ourselves assume the task of vengeance which outraged nature summons him to perform, and to which his will is spurred by every virtuous instinct of loyalty, of reverence, and of filial devotion. Because, like Hamlet, we recognize within our own nature honorable excitements both of reason and of blood impelling to the deed. Because, in this instance,

## AND ITS SOLUTION

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vengeance is *idealized*. Retributive justice cries out for the life of the murderer, the diabolical horror of whose crime neither human nor divine law may condone. Moreover, the act of vengeance in this case implies self-sacrifice, involving no immediate personal gain. Being once removed from self, the personal motive is obscured, and so receives a seemingly moral sanction. Weighed in the merely human scale, vengeance were justified: it is "questionable" only when considered in its absolute and eternal bearings.

Some writers appear to assume that Hamlet, if cross-examined on the subject-matter of his meditation, could have been induced to answer in unequivocal terms his own self-arraignment. Such an assumption fails to recognize the true function of soliloquy, which is to exhibit the secret operations of the mind, to reveal the speaker's inmost thought and feeling. Hamlet's insistent self-questioning is by

## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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no means merely rhetorical: it implies inscrutable mystery. Shakespeare has put into soliloquy all that Hamlet knew concerning the cause of his own inaction; and to assume that this is not true, were not only to accuse Shakespeare of departing from his usual "honest method"; — it were to ignore the fact that we ourselves have given a qualified sanction to the motive of vengeance, and that for Hamlet's delay no better explanation can be offered than that suggested by his own words considered in the light of the total dramatic action.

The mandate of the Ghost appeals to a natural impulse of blood rather than to a sense of moral duty, and quick obedience to that mandate, as at first conceived by Hamlet, involves no other motive than that of personal honor and filial devotion. Yet the obligation of vengeance is none the less real in that it is purely personal. And, under the irresistible control of

## AND ITS SOLUTION

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Shakespeare's art, the reader is compelled to view the situation through the eyes of the central character. He is compelled in imagination to assume the task of vengeance, to enter into Hamlet's moral struggle, so dimly understood, and to follow with approval his reasonings throughout the play; and only at the end of the last act does he come deliberately to weigh the passionate motive in the balance of conscience.

That the obligation of vengeance symbolizes the relative or personal as opposed to the absolute duty, may be inferred not only directly, from the phraseology employed by the Ghost and by Hamlet in reference to the passionate motive, but also indirectly, from the significant fact that in Hamlet's last soliloquy (Act IV, Scene IV), in which he declares that he is "exhorted" to the deed by "examples gross as earth," the only example cited is that afforded by the conduct of



## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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Fortinbras,—an example of rash and hair-brained adventure in the name of honor merely,—an “example gross as earth,” indeed, of action prompted by ambitious pride, in which honor is farthest removed from moral obligation. This “delicate and tender prince,” the heroic folly of whose exploit against Poland Hamlet contrasts with his own inaction, is, be it remembered, the same reckless youth, “of unimprovèd metal hot and full,” who, shortly before, had “sharked up a list of lawless resolute” for some wrongful enterprise against Denmark, and all without the sanction or even the knowledge of his “bed-rid” uncle, king of Norway, who, as we afterwards learn from Voltimand, is “grieved that so his sickness, age, and impotence” should have been thus “falsely borne in hand” by his nephew. The true significance of this soliloquy lies in its negative implication. No better example of irrational



## AND ITS SOLUTION

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action springing from honorable instincts of blood, could well be conceived, than this of Fortinbras, cited by Hamlet to his own disparagement and self-reproach.

#### IV

THE theory advanced in these pages rests squarely upon the text, and derives its chief support from universally accepted data. Act by act and scene by scene, in the light of this theory, we may trace the progress of Hamlet's moral development, as indicated by stages of a crucial conflict of motives relating to the question of vengeance, and by corresponding phases of a change in mental attitude toward life.

The successive stages of Hamlet's transforming struggle,—of the conflict of motives relating to the question of vengeance,—are presented, respectively: in the third soliloquy, beginning, "O all you host of heaven!" (Act I, Scene V); in the fourth soliloquy, "O, what a rogue and

## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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peasant slave am I!" (Act II, Scene II); in the soliloquy beginning, "How all occasions do inform against me!" (Act IV, Scene IV); and, finally, in the earnest question put to Horatio (Act V, Scene II): "Does it not, thinks't thee, stand me now upon," etc., in which it may be seen that the personal motive and the impersonal are all but mutually reconciled in Hamlet's consciousness.

Hamlet's change in mental attitude toward life is precisely indicated through the medium of soliloquy and dialogue. His attitude of mind at the beginning of the play—before he has learned of his father's murder and assumed the task of vengeance—is revealed in the opening lines of the first soliloquy (Act I, Scene II); the intermediate phase of his transformation is represented in the familiar monologue, "To be or not to be," at the middle of the play (Act III, Scene I); while the culminant and final stage of his

## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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development is marked by philosophic generalizations addressed to Horatio in the closing scene (Act V, Scene II).

Hamlet's crucial and transforming struggle, while it originates in the conflict of motives consequent upon the assumption of the task of vengeance, and therefore finds its first expression in the soliloquy immediately following the departure of the Ghost, is anticipated and foreshadowed in the opening soliloquy (Act I, Scene II), which not only serves to exhibit Hamlet's mental attitude toward life, but is artfully constructed with reference to the whole complex psychological design. It will be observed that this soliloquy ("O, that this too too solid flesh would melt!") falls naturally into three clearly marked divisions, which follow one another in vital sequence, and which comprise, respectively, the first four lines (ending with the word, "self-slaughter"), the next five lines (ending with,

## AND ITS SOLUTION

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"Possess it merely"), and the rest of the soliloquy (twenty-two lines). In the first of these divisions Hamlet is represented as shrinking with spiritual anguish from the tragic burden of existence. That this aversion to life does not arise from morbid causes or from any inherent weakness in Hamlet's nature, but that, on the contrary, it springs from profound moral sensibility, is shown in the second division of the soliloquy, where the Prince contemplates with abhorrence and revulsion the sensual grossness of the world. This feeling of abhorrence and revulsion increases in intensity as Hamlet, passing in thought from the general to the special, reflects upon his mother's "incestuous" union. Hamlet chafes under the restraint which compels him to silence ("But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue!"), but he does not, as yet, recognize within himself the imperative obligation which summons man to the responsibility of ac-



## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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tion. Life is, indeed, a duty, but as yet it is a duty of suffering endurance merely, and not of performance. Nevertheless, in this first soliloquy the antithetical elements of Hamlet's crucial struggle are *negatively* suggested by the fact that the all-environing grossness which renders life "weary, flat, stale, and unprofitable," and from which he shrinks with moral loathing, here presents itself to his mind in two aspects, the one impersonal and relating generally to the world, the other personal and relating to his mother and his uncle.

In Hamlet's third soliloquy (Act I, Scene V) we discern the initial stage of his moral transformation, the first significant change in moral attitude toward life and life's obligations, immediately consequent upon the assumption of the task of vengeance. It will be observed that the psychic process depicted in this monologue is just the reverse of that portrayed in

## AND ITS SOLUTION

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the first soliloquy, the transition in thought being from the particular to the general, from the personal to the impersonal. We have noted in an earlier paragraph that, through the operation of subconscious, expansive forces in Hamlet's nature, the mandate of the Ghost, in a prophetic moment of moral illumination at the end of the scene, translates itself into a universal duty. The passionate impulse of vengeance yields place to an imperative sense of moral obligation, tragic in its depth, felt toward the world. Radical indeed is the change already wrought in Hamlet. Though he deplores the inexorable conditions of his fate, the duty of life is converted from an obligation of mere passive endurance to one of positive performance.—The soliloquy under present discussion exhibits the first convulsive throes of Hamlet's transforming struggle. The seed of discord has been sown. Hamlet is self-committed to the act of

## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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vengeance. But the dread commandment of the Ghost not only imposes on his soul the personal obligation of revenge ("If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not!"), but also enjoins a *moral caution*:

"But, howsoever thou pursuest this act,  
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive  
Against thy mother aught."

The subtle import of this qualifying injunction, as revealing the true nature of Hamlet's inward struggle, may be inferred from the fact that, while in the earlier stages of that struggle he assumes that the execution of his revenge implies the immediate killing of the King, he at no time yields so far to the sway of passionate impulse as to constrain his will to instant action by the binding force of oath. The oath to which he does bind himself at the close of this soliloquy commits his soul not to immediate vengeance, but merely to the remembrance of the Ghost's command-

## AND ITS SOLUTION

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ment. No allusion is made to the impetuous determination already formed. In the moments of release from the extraordinary tension to which Hamlet's mind has been subjected in the presence of the Ghost, the thought of vengeance,—so absolute is the sway of reactionary moral forces within his nature,—is in abeyance, if not entirely absent from consciousness. The powers of volition are partially suspended. Imagination has free play. But the operations of reason, though spasmodic, and though revealed to the reader only in broken sentences, have reference to his mother's degradation and his uncle's unspeakable crime and hypocrisy:

"O most pernicious woman!  
O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!  
My tables,—meet it is I set it down,  
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain;  
At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark."

The act of writing indicated in the stage-



## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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directions at this point need not be regarded as merely symbolic. It is literal in its signification, being at one with the psychological action clearly denoted by the language of the passage. Conscious doubt as to the truth of his own moral intuitions (the "honesty" of the Ghost) has not entered Hamlet's mind. Deliberation and self-analysis have not yet conspired to undermine the foundations of self-trust. But imagination can not compass the monstrous crime, which, though accepted in consciousness as indubitable, presents to Hamlet's reason the aspect of unreality. Amid the whirl of conflicting passions, the abhorrent fact is jotted down in visual signs, in order to fix in Hamlet's distracted mind the fatal record of the King's guilt. The subjective process here depicted is followed in the next soliloquy (Act II, Scene II) by a reactionary mood of self-analysis and doubt. Absolute moral conviction does not replace this wavering uncertainty



## AND ITS SOLUTION

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until the successful stratagem of the "play-scene" (Act III, Scene III) has furnished Hamlet with conclusive evidence of his uncle's crime.

Before proceeding to consider Hamlet's fourth soliloquy (Act II, Scene II), which, like each of his subsequent monologues, in Act III and Act IV, can be clearly understood only when studied in its relation to the general design, we wish once more to emphasize the fact that the psychic experience the earlier stages of which are depicted in soliloquy, is the transforming process of moral growth, an unfolding of the mind in its upward struggle, a development from immature to mature manhood. Whatever age we may assume for Hamlet, the student lately returned from Wittenberg, the text leaves no doubt as to his age at the end of the play. From the words of the grave-digger we learn that the Prince, at the time of his return to Denmark after the fateful sea-voyage, is

## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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just thirty years old, the approximate age of intellectual maturity among men, the period in which culminate those mighty and revolutionary changes which, from the "passion-chaos" of youth, evolve the philosophic reason. Hamlet, in the earlier scenes of the play, though he possesses all the noblest attributes with which lavish nature endows her chosen sons, is distinctly "young Hamlet,"—Hamlet the paragon of "blown youth." Not so in the fifth act, where his discourse to Horatio reveals a mind which through the discipline of experience has fully developed all its sovereign powers.

To preserve consistency in the psychological design of the play, Shakespeare, according to his usual method, has purposely left indefinite the length of time required by the dramatic action. The intervals which may be supposed to elapse between acts and even between scenes are not precisely indicated. The period which

## AND ITS SOLUTION

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intervenes between the events of the last scene of the first act and the occasion of the soliloquy beginning, "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" (Act II, Scene II), though relatively brief, is to be measured by days, perhaps, rather than by hours. Amid the detested surroundings of the actual world, the Ghost's commandment returns to memory with insistent force. It requires only the player's pathetic rehearsal of the story of Priam's slaughter and the tragic grief of Hecuba, to cause Hamlet's pent-up emotions to burst forth in impassioned monologue. The Prince of Denmark here assumes that, in fulfilment of an honorable duty, he ought instantly to avenge his father's murder, and he can think of no reasonable justification or honorable excuse for his delay; nevertheless, an imperative voice from the depths of his spiritual nature gives pause to rash impulse. He is obedient to a deterring instinct which, though

## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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but darkly understood, he dare not ignore. The true import and supernatural authority of this restraining force become evident to him as events proceed, but here the restraint is only operative as holding his passions in leash and his judgment in suspense. The mighty subjective forces deterring him from vengeance, though inexplicable, are tentatively construed as premonitory instinct forewarning against precipitate action. Striving to reconcile the dictates of reason with the dissuading whispers of his spiritual nature, and groping vainly to discover in outward conditions the sufficient cause and justification for an apparently inconsistent reluctance proceeding wholly *from within*, Hamlet, with skeptical precaution, is led to question the "honesty" of the Ghost,—to doubt the validity of his own well-founded convictions regarding his uncle's crime,—concluding that the true "grounds" for his delay may be, perchance, not lack of resolution or



## AND ITS SOLUTION

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courage, but a want of evidence "more relative" than that furnished by the supernatural witness of a phantom:

"The spirit that I have seen  
May be the devil; and the devil hath power  
To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps  
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,  
As he is very potent with such spirits,  
Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds  
More relative than this. The play's the thing  
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king."

In the interval between the conception and the execution of the ingenious plot by which Hamlet essays to "catch the conscience of the king,"—in this interval of temporary release from insistent thoughts of immediate vengeance and from feelings of self-reproach consequent upon a mortifying sense of neglected obligation,—Hamlet's mind reverts to philosophic questionings concerning human life and destiny, exploring with prescient awe the infinite regions of speculation, while his tongue utters the solemn and sublime



## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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words of that profound soliloquy which, whether taken alone or in its organic relation to the progressive action of the tragedy, grandly illustrates the breadth of Shakespeare's dramatic design. No other passage in the play is more familiar to the popular mind than the impressive monologue beginning, "To be or not to be," which, owing to the universality of its theme, no less than to the solemn and meditative note which lends characteristic charm to the deep-meaning lines, has come to be regarded by the popular tribunal as peculiarly "*Hamlet's* soliloquy," being, in fact, peculiarly an utterance of the "universal" Hamlet.

It has been pointed out, in an earlier paragraph, that in the passage which now claims our attention may be discovered the profounder implications of Hamlet's struggle as typifying a common experience of the race. The cowardice of "conscience," to which Hamlet here attributes man's in-

## AND ITS SOLUTION

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stinctive revulsion to suicide, is, in the final analysis, identical with the inexplicable reluctance which, in the preceding soliloquy, gave rise to self-accusations of personal cowardice, and with the dimly recognized moral scruple to which, in the soliloquy next following, the Prince, still goading himself to passionate vengeance with the unrelenting lash of sarcasm, applies the terms "craven" and "coward." This cowardice proceeds from "conscience," that is, from man's intuitive recognition of the law that is impersonal and divine.


We have said that the soliloquy, "To be or not to be," is peculiarly an utterance of the "universal" Hamlet. This is true, but not in the absolute sense that Hamlet's gloomy reflections at this point in the play voice the ultimate conclusions of human wisdom. The attitude of mind denoted by Hamlet's course of reasoning in this soliloquy is no more truly character-

## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

---

istic of the Prince than are the earlier and the later phases of his intellectual and spiritual progression. His mental attitude at the end of the play (Act V, Scene II) is tranquil and philosophic. Resignation, acquiescence, impersonal devotion to duty in the highest sense,— these are the attributes of his moral wisdom as revealed in his speeches to Horatio in the closing scene. At the beginning of the play, we behold Hamlet oppressed by a burdening sense of the infinite responsibility resting upon his individual soul, a responsibility from which he fain would shrink, but dare not, alas, lest he should contravene an ordinance of Heaven:

“O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,  
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!  
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd  
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter!”

 The change of mental attitude revealed in the soliloquy, “To be or not to be,” though subtle, is nevertheless clearly

## AND ITS SOLUTION

---

marked. Hamlet is still under the dominant control of the *personal* motive. He still measures the worth of life by standards of selfish interest and desire. But he has now come to view the human situation more judicially, more profoundly, and with a more philosophic eye. He speaks, in this soliloquy, not for himself alone, but for all mankind ("Thus conscience doth make cowards of *us all*"), for all mankind who have not yet come unto the highest estate of moral wisdom.

The next two soliloquies of Hamlet,—that beginning, "'Tis now the very witching time of night" (Act III, Scene II), and that which opens with the words, "Now might I do it pat, now he is praying" (Act III, Scene III),—reveal the dark and ominous drift of a passion directly consequent upon Hamlet's now absolute moral certainty of his uncle's crime, resulting from the King's guilty self-betrayal at the "play-scene." That the



## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

---

Prince recognizes the perilous tendency of this ascendant passion, is clearly manifest in the first of these monologues, which relates primarily to his mother, and which, in its closing lines, recalls to the reader's thought the solemn forewarning of the Ghost:

"'Tis now the very witching time of night,  
When churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes  
out  
Contagion to this world; now could I drink hot  
blood,  
And do such bitter business as the day  
Would quake to look on. Soft! now to my  
mother.  
O heart, lose not thy nature; let not ever  
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom;  
Let me be cruel, not unnatural;  
I will speak daggers to her, but use none;  
My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites:  
How in my words soever she be shent,  
To give them seals, never, my soul, consent!"

In the second of the two soliloquies,—  
that which relates to the King at prayer,  
—Hamlet checks the impulse to instant

## AND ITS SOLUTION

---

action, only to indulge, in imagination, an ideal vengeance appalling in the horror of its retributive justice. He contemplates not merely the sacrifice of life for life:— In return for the purgatorial pains presumably being suffered by his father, he would doom to eternal torment his uncle's soul:

“Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent:  
When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,  
Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed;  
At gaming, swearing, or about some act  
That has no relish of salvation in't;  
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,  
And that his soul may be as damn'd and black  
As hell, whereto it goes.”

Passion has reached its climax. The deed of vengeance is at last fully determined upon,—the killing of the King when he is “about some act that has no relish of salvation in't.” How soon thereafter does Hamlet's fell purpose culminate in action! The thrust through the arras is *intended* for the King.

## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

---

It has been shown that in the accident fatal to Polonius we may discern the hand of destiny thwarting Hamlet's purpose, and that the tragic disaster consequent upon the impetuous sword-thrust may be interpreted as a divine rebuke, a heavenly chastisement and warning. Hamlet's violent deed is bewailed by his mother as "rash and bloody." It has been characterized by an eminent critic as an act of "blind passion," of "hot impulsive rage." Neither of these descriptions is precisely true. Hamlet's mortal stroke, though impetuous, can not, strictly speaking, be regarded as "rash." Still less can it be said to spring from blind passion or ungovernable rage. Hamlet is here by no means an irresponsible agent. Swift, intuitive judgment preceded the homicidal volition, and the lightning thrust which followed is wholly consistent with that quick decision. The judgment, however, is erroneous, being prejudicially influenced by the vengeful

## AND ITS SOLUTION

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passion to which the Prince has given unrestrained indulgence since the moment of his uncle's guilty self-betrayal, the proof of the "honesty" of the Ghost having been misconstrued by Hamlet as a justification of his bloody course of thought and as an incitement to speedy revenge.

The accidental killing of Polonius marks the turning-point at once of the dramatic and of the psychological action of the tragedy. We see here depicted the crucial phase of an elemental experience. The personal motive of revenge, which, in the first half of the play, gains supremacy over Hamlet's will, with disastrous consequence in the death of an unintended victim, gradually yields dominion to the authority of an impersonal motive. The larger ideal is at first but vaguely apprehended, and only in exalted moments, but by degrees, along with the ripening of Hamlet's mind ever alive to the progress of providential event, this ideal becomes



## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

---

clearly manifest, furnishing the standard and test of right, by which the lesser motive is judged.

The inference to be derived from the fact that in the impetuous sword-thrust through the arras, in the middle of the play, Hamlet executed a predetermined and deliberate purpose,—that he is vouchsafed complete indulgence, in thought and in act, of his vengeful passion, only to discover that his mortal stroke thwarts his design, entailing tragic disaster,—is unmistakable. Without tainting his soul with the guilt of intended evil, the untoward event startles his mind from the contemplation of inward to that of outward fact. It thus widens his intellectual horizon, opening his consciousness to the imminent authority of divine law operating visibly in the objective world. The full significance of this divine rebuke,—this negative lesson,—is purposely obscured at this point in the play. But the

## AND ITS SOLUTION

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incident, nevertheless, is interpreted by Hamlet as a symbol and a revelation. Hereafter his mind shall be ever on the alert for the heavenly signal. Truth which is derived from self-analysis and introspective thought, is partial. Perfect wisdom shall come only with the knowledge of external truth which is written in the ways of Providence. To "reasonings of the mind turned inward" must be added reasonings of the mind turned outward. To knowledge of the law that is within man's members must be added knowledge of the law that is divine.

Concerning the occasion and significance of Hamlet's last soliloquy (Act IV, Scene IV), something has already been said. It has been shown that the example of Fortinbras, whose reckless venture against Poland involves not only the hazard of his own life, but the "imminent death of twenty thousand men,"—an example cited by Hamlet to his own dispraise,—is

## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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an instance "gross as earth" of action springing from ambitious pride, in which the motive of honor (the *personal* motive) is farthest removed from moral duty. Regarding the import of this soliloquy as marking a subtle but significant phase in Hamlet's transforming struggle, a few additional words of explanation are required. Hamlet's utterances at this point in the play, while they denote a reactionary mood of self-distrust analogous to that revealed in his fourth soliloquy (Act II, Scene II), exhibit, nevertheless, a more advanced stage of thought and feeling, induced by the precedent subjective experience of Act III. From the throes of penitent anguish a higher spiritual life is struggling to be born. Conscience, the authoritative force of which is confessed in the previous soliloquy ("To be or not to be") as forbidding the act of self-slaughter, now asserts its sway in consciousness as a negative factor in all his reason-

## AND ITS SOLUTION

---

ings concerning the act of vengeance. Be it observed, however, that its authority is as yet only negative, being recognized merely as a deterrent force, and not as a clear and positive intimation of right. Passion is still at war with conscience, the sovereignty of which is contemptuously disputed by reason. The moral impulse is still characterized by Hamlet as mere "craven scruple,"—the "conscience" which "doth make cowards of us all." Hamlet is here represented not as certain of the wisdom of his inaction, but only as less absolute in the assurance that he is not right in delaying the deed of vengeance. He dimly recognizes, at best, the "one part wisdom" of the thought which insistently admonishes against precipitate action. In this soliloquy we find Hamlet for the last time fanning the embers of vindictive passion—those ever-subsiding fires which are now rendered ineffectual by the countervailing authority of con-



## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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science. His inward struggle, having become less violently emotional, more dispassionate, is represented in terms almost wholly intellectual. We feel that the conflict is nearing its end, and that Hamlet is now far removed, mentally and spiritually, from any impulsive act of mere personal revenge,—notwithstanding the final exclamatory words of vain resolve with which he essays to revive a dying purpose.

The mind and character of Hamlet are again and again brought into sharp contrast with other and lesser intellects and natures. To the reader who, viewing Hamlet's situation through Hamlet's self-depreciatory eyes, is prone to exalt the character and laud the conduct of Fortinbras as furnishing an ideal of heroic manhood worthy of Hamlet's emulation, the pathetically unheroic transformation of Laertes in Act IV, Scene VII,—his sudden conversion from the reckless and uncompromising champion of honor to the des-

## AND ITS SOLUTION

---

picable estate of a mere dupe of villainy, the willing tool of a vile king,—presents an insurmountable difficulty, the effect of the latter incident, in such case, being to neutralize the impression received from the previous scene. It has been noted in an earlier paragraph that the character of Hamlet finds its perfect antithesis in that of Claudius, the contrast between these “mighty opposites” consisting in the fact that while the former embodies in an ideal manner the attributes and tendencies of a most noble and moral nature, the latter typifies the reverse human qualities. The contrast between Hamlet and Laertes, unlike that between Hamlet and Claudius, is not the contrast between a virtuous and a vicious nature, but rather that between a profound and a superficial mind. From the speeches of Laertes in Act IV, Scene V, or from his words in Act I, Scene III, the reader has no reason to doubt the essential justice of

## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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Hamlet's magnanimous description of Ophelia's brother as a "very noble youth." The motive of revenge, prompted by filial devotion, is not less commendable in Laertes than in Hamlet. It is in their mental attitude toward life and life's responsibilities that the two characters differ so radically. Ultimate and eternal issues have little or no weight with Laertes. In pursuance of vengeance he would give to neglect all other obligations, whether human or divine:

"To hell, allegiance! vows, to the blackest devil!  
Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!  
I dare damnation. To this point I stand:  
That both the worlds I give to negligence,  
Let come what comes; only I'll be reveng'd  
Most thoroughly for my father."

Such blustering words of reckless profanation reveal, not indeed an ignoble nature, but a mind incapable of profound moral discernment,—a mind which in its overweening presumption can as readily

## AND ITS SOLUTION

---

defy the holy ordinances of Heaven as renounce all vows of earthly allegiance. Though not without heroic traits, the superficial Laertes, true son of the shallow Polonius, is pathetically lacking in all the sovereign attributes of mind and character which constitute Hamlet's greatness, enabling him to discern beneath the outward shows of life the eternal verities of the spiritual world.



## V

IN the foregoing paragraphs attention has been confined mainly to the earlier stages of Hamlet's internal struggle, as revealed through the medium of soliloquy in the first four acts of the play. It remains for us now to consider, in its relation to that struggle, the culminant phase of his moral evolution, as indicated by his discourse to Horatio in Act V. What, precisely, is the change wrought in Hamlet by experience and reflection during the period of his enforced absence from Denmark? As the result of protracted meditation on his miraculous and providential exploit, what is his final outlook upon the world of man, and what his mental attitude toward the question of vengeance? We have shown that the crucial conflict depicted in

## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

---

Hamlet's soliloquies is the transforming process of mental and moral growth, an intellectual and spiritual ripening. Hamlet's solemn utterances to Horatio, in the fifth act, reveal a mind which through tragic ordeal has come into the heritage of moral wisdom. Only in the fifth act does the Prince of Denmark move before us in the complete majesty and splendor of his matured faculties. His mind is now serene — his will no longer in opposition to the will of Heaven. His violent mental conflict has subsided, and something like a settled peace has come upon his soul. Soliloquy is at an end; purpose and action are at last in close accord; and for the first time in the play Hamlet's philosophic generalizations concerning human life and destiny may be construed as Shakespeare's ultimate word on the problematic theme.

The fifth act comprises two scenes. The first scene opens with Hamlet's satiric moralizings at the edge of the newly-made

## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

---

grave, and closes with the dramatic incident in which, impelled by a "towering passion" evoked by the "bravery" of Laertes' grief for Ophelia, Hamlet leaps into the grave. Scene II opens with Hamlet's solemn rehearsal of the "circumstance" of his providential return to Denmark on the pirate ship, and ends with the fatal fencing-match and its tragic sequel of divine retribution.

Hamlet's reflections in Scene I,—his somber meditations on the vanity of human ambition, pride, and power,—denote a mind engrossed with the consideration of infinite and eternal issues. There could be no greater error than to assume that his caustic animadversions on the presumption of the lawyer and the politician, on the sycophancy of the courtier, and on the common destiny which awaits all mankind,—which humbles the towering pride of an Alexander or a Cæsar, even as it silences the frivolous mirth of a

## AND ITS SOLUTION

---

Yorick,—are to be construed as evidence of cynicism or fatalism on Hamlet's part. In the depths of his nature Hamlet is neither a cynic nor a fatalist. His irony questions not the spiritual verities of life. In spite of the seemingly fatalistic tenor of his mood, his whimsical speculations at this point are in no wise incompatible with an absolute acceptance of the providential wisdom of God.

Hamlet's discourse in Scene II denotes a more exalted mood and a more advanced phase of thought than are represented in the previous scene, and implies a change in mental attitude induced by the mortifying realization that in an unguarded moment of "towering passion" he had forgotten himself to Laertes, in whose cause he now beholds the image of his own. In the interval of self-analysis immediately following the stormy outburst at Ophelia's grave, Hamlet's soul is again brought before the judgment-bar of conscience, and by a sec-



## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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ond "chastisement of remorse," which operates as a final and authoritative check upon self-indulgent passion, is prepared at last for its complete spiritual awakening. Sharp indeed is the contrast between the mocking and ironic humor of his reflections on the vanity of human presumption, and the sober and reverent mood in which he ponders the infinite mystery of Providence. On reading the opening lines of Scene II we are at once struck by Hamlet's air of abstraction, the manner of one absorbed in the contemplation of ultra-mundane things. We are impressed, likewise, by the solemnity of his utterances, denoting in the speaker's mind: (1) a recognition of the certitude of Providential Wisdom shaping the affairs of men; (2) religious resignation to the will of Heaven, by which, through conscience, his action is now wholly controlled; and (3) a deepened sense of the inscrutable mys-

## AND ITS SOLUTION

---

tery of human life. With absolute consistency and precision of detail has Shakespeare depicted the culminant phase of Hamlet's moral development,—Hamlet's attitude of mind in the closing scene being indicated not only by philosophic generalizations ("There's a divinity that shapes our ends"; "We defy augury: there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow," etc.) in which the Prince formulates his religious faith, and by the prevailing tenor of his discourse to Horatio, but also by specific observations of a more abstruse character concerning the subconscious operations of his own mind under the miraculous control of omniscient intelligence, implying on Hamlet's part a recognition of man's occult and mysterious relation to the supernatural order.

Our interpretation of the tragedy of *Hamlet* may fittingly conclude with a brief

## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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analysis of the one remaining passage of the play requiring elucidation in view of the theory advanced in these pages. The passage to which we refer, the only passage in Act V bearing directly on the question of vengeance, occupies a subordinate setting in the text, immediately after Hamlet's account of his providential exploit, and, from its suspended character as an unanswered and unanswerable question, partakes somewhat of the nature of soliloquy, and depicts with marvelous delicacy of shading the last subtle phase of Hamlet's internal struggle:

"Does it not, thinks't thee, stand me now upon —  
He that hath kill'd my king and whor'd my  
mother,  
Popp'd in between the election and my hopes,  
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,  
And with such cozenage—is't not perfect conscience  
To quit him with this arm? and is't not to be  
damn'd,  
To let this canker of our nature come  
In further evil?"

## AND ITS SOLUTION

---

It will be observed that the question of vengeance here presents itself to Hamlet's mind in a dual aspect. No longer does the Prince of Denmark regard the killing of the King as an immediate and unrelated obligation. He now contemplates the deed both from the personal and from the impersonal viewpoint; and instead of arraigning himself, as on previous occasions, for the cowardice of neglected action, he here dispassionately weighs the passionate motive in the balance of conscience, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, seeks to reconcile this motive with the absolute monitions of religious duty. His words clearly denote an attitude of mind in which the conflicting elements of his protracted moral struggle are all but mutually harmonized. Horatio does not venture an answer to questions of conscience and duty which time and circumstance alone can answer. Complete reconciliation of the personal with the imper-



## THE HAMLET PROBLEM

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sonal motive does not occur until the heaven-determined moment when Hamlet consummates his appointed task, only as the sable curtain of death is falling on the last scene of all of his tragic human story.





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